

# Intimacy Beyond Sex: Korean Television Dramas, Nonsexual Masculinities, and Transnational Erotic Desires

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*In the twenty-first century, Korean television dramas have gained transnational popularity in a phenomenon called Hallyu. Believing that these Korean television dramas accurately portray how Korean men are in real life, some white women from North America and Europe travel to Korea as Hallyu tourists to form intimate relations with Korean men. This essay is based on the data I gathered through ethnographic field research in 2017–18, during which I interviewed and observed these Hallyu tourists. Some of my Hallyu tourist informants claimed that they traveled to Korea because they were motivated by the nonsexual depictions of Korean men in the television dramas. They viewed Korean men as the racial, ethnic, and nonsexual others who would provide them with alternatives to sex-based intimacy. I examine my Hallyu tourist informants' desires for Korean men through the theoretical frameworks of nonsexuality and racialized erotics. I argue that some of my informants' erotic desires for nonsexual Korean men reinforce Orientalist stereotypes about Korean men's sexuality. By examining the racial and sexual politics of some white female tourists' erotic desires for nonsexual Korean men, I demonstrate the indivisibility of nonsexuality from race.*

**Keywords:** Hallyu / Korean television dramas / masculinity / nonsexuality / racialized erotics / sex tourism

“Western men are way too aggressive. I like Korean men because they are gentlemanly and romantic,” a female tourist to South Korea (hereafter Korea) said to me as we were walking on the busy streets of Seoul. The so-called *western*

men whom she referred to were men from European countries, including her home country of Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> During my ethnographic field research in Korea, I observed numerous white female tourists expressing erotic desires for Korean men. One noteworthy aspect of their erotic desires was that some of them claimed to like Korean men for their purported nonsexuality. However, none of the women identified themselves as asexual or nonsexual; they all identified as *allosexual* (persons who do experience sexual attraction). Why did these women view Korean men as nonsexual? Why did they feel the need to travel to Korea to find nonsexual partners?

Many of the women I spoke to who traveled to Korea to form intimate relations with Korean men claimed that they were inspired to travel to Korea by Korean television dramas. Many of them claimed to have spent at least a few hours a day watching them; during my fieldwork, I observed them doing so on their computers or phones. The transnational popularity of Korean television dramas is part of a broader phenomenon called *Hallyu* (literally translated as the *Korean wave*), which refers to how people from all over the world consume Korean popular culture such as K-pop (Korean popular music), Korean television dramas, Korean films, and beauty products. *Hallyu* is a \$19.7 trillion industry that is growing in size every year (Hankyung Newsroom 2019). Compared to 2017, the revenues from *Hallyu*-related activities and products increased by 10 percent in 2019 (Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange 2019).

Not only do scores of international fans of Korean television dramas watch the shows, some of them travel to Korea to experience the cultures they saw on the television dramas, as was the case with my informants. In Korea, this type of tourism is called *Hallyu* tourism. Approximately 17 million tourists visited Korea in 2019; more than half of them were women who claimed that they went as *Hallyu* tourists (Korea Tourism Organization 2020). Most of these tourists were citizens of other Asian countries, but a significant number were also from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Switzerland (Korea Tourism Organization 2020). During my field research in Korea, I found that some of the white female *Hallyu* tourists from Europe and North America visited Korea specifically to form intimate relationships with Korean men. I observed these women spending more time on Tinder, a dating app, and going on dates with Korean men than shopping or sightseeing.

In this essay, I examine the racial and sexual politics of the white female *Hallyu* tourists' erotic desires for nonsexual Korean men. I analyze their desires through the theoretical frameworks of nonsexuality and racialized erotics. This essay contributes to theories on nonsexuality by analyzing the inextricability of nonsexuality from race and gender. I suggest that my informants traveled to Korea in an attempt to escape from the *sexusociety* and the sexually oriented dating culture in their home countries. *Sexusociety* refers to "... the prevalence of a hookup culture in which people get together for a sexual encounter with no promise or desire to develop a relationship" (Vares 2018, 525). I argue that

as part of their attempts to break free from the sexusociety, my Hallyu tourist informants interpreted and fantasized about Korean men as the nonsexual, racial, and ethnic *others* who could provide alternative forms of relationships to those available in sexusociety in their respective cultures. They erotically fantasized about Korean men as antithetical to the supposedly hypersexual men whom they dated prior to traveling to Korea. Perhaps due to the racial stereotypes characterizing East Asian men as less virile compared to men of other races, some of my informants did not seem to think that Korea has its own version of sexusociety. Rather, they viewed their travel to Korea as *escaping* from sexusociety, to a dating scene in Korea that—they believed—does not revolve around sex.

I critically examine how their desires and discourses of nonsexuality reaffirmed racial stereotypes about East Asian men. My informants' desires for nonsexual Korean men were intertwined with stereotypes of East Asian men as sexually weak and passive, and they racially and sexually exoticized the notion of nonsexual Korean men. Rather than providing radical and alternative visions of sexuality and intimacy, in such contexts, nonsexuality became a framework through which to perpetuate preexisting racial and sexual biases against the racial *other*. In the next section, I examine how the concepts of asexuality and nonsexuality are intertwined with gender and race.

### Gendered and Racialized Asexuality

The gendered assumptions about women's sexual passiveness and men's sexual assertiveness shape how individuals experience their (a)sexuality and how others perceive them. Asexual women claim that heterosexual men approach them and offer to *cure* their asexuality with sex (Vares 2018). These women's asexuality and their sexual unavailability to men are perceived as illnesses that need to be *cured*. Meanwhile, asexual men feel pressured to initiate sex during dates, lest their female partners question their manhood (Vares 2018). In that regard, asexuality as an identity and a form of experience is interwoven with gender (Dawson, Scott, and McDonnell 2018).

Furthermore, asexuality must be examined in intersection with race. Ela Przybylo (2019) asserts that some white asexual individuals claim asexuality as a sexual identity affiliated with whiteness, asserting that white people are more sexually reticent than people of color. They draw upon racial stereotypes that hypersexualize people of color. By drawing connections between whiteness and asexuality, they portray white asexual people's experiences as the norm and marginalize the experiences of asexual people of color (Przybylo 2019). Current research on asexuality provides insights into how asexually identified individuals find agency, or lack thereof, based on their race and gender (Dawson, Scott, and McDonnell 2018; Gupta 2017). My research draws from these works in that I refrain from examining asexuality as a singular and overarching concept that

negates all other forms of identities. I examine asexuality as unequivocally entwined with race and gender.

I define asexuality as a spectrum of feelings and desires. Thom Winter-Gray and Nikki Hayfield (2019) argue that strict definitions of asexuality heighten stigma against it by essentializing it. They recommend that asexuality be defined as not only an identity but also as a spectrum of feelings regarding sexual and romantic relationships. Although examining asexuality as an identity is important, I agree with Winter-Gray and Hayfield that to examine it as simply a form of sexual identity limits the scope of the theories and praxis that could be examined through the asexual lens.

The concept of nonsexuality is generative for my essay in that it serves as a term that can describe the spectrum of feelings related to asexuality. Nonsexuality means “various articulations and iterations of low sexual desire and sexual absence,” which “have not been coalesced under an identity of asexuality that has subjective meaning for those who use it” (Przybylo 2019, 29). I suggest that my informants were operating through a spectrum of nonsexual feelings. They did not identify as asexual or nonsexual, but they evoked discourses of nonsexuality in describing their erotic desires for nonsexual Korean men. In this essay, I examine how my allosexual Hallyu tourist informants mobilized the feelings and desires related to nonsexuality to critique the sexusociety and compulsory sexuality. Here, by *compulsory sexuality*, I refer to the form of social order that compels individuals to “experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity” (Gupta 2015, 132). My informants’ racialized erotic desires for nonsexual Korean men were illustrative of their feelings of nonsexuality rather than being representative of asexual identities.

My informants were unique in their interpretations of Korean men as nonsexual. As I will analyze later in this essay, neither Korean viewers nor other Asian viewers interpret the Korean men in the television dramas as nonsexual. I suggest that some of my informants’ desires were based on their fascination with the racial and sexual *other*. They desexualized Korean men in order to create a group of nonsexual and racial *others* about whom they could fantasize in lieu of *settling* for hypersexual men and sexual relationships that they found distasteful. In other words, my informants desexualized Korean men because they wanted to fantasize about men who could offer alternatives to sex-based intimacy.

Przybylo argues that desexualized groups face prejudice in the form of *asexphobia*. Scholarly works have examined how East Asian men, throughout US history, have experienced a form of asexphobia in that they have been desexualized and consequently deemed sexually unappealing (Eng 2001; Nguyen 2014). Whereas Korean men did experience a form of racial prejudice from my informants, based on my ethnographic observations, Korean men did not experience prejudice in the shape of asexphobia: some of my informants sought Korean men as intimate partners because they believed Korean men were nonsexual or sexually unassertive. In that regard, Korean men experienced

*asexphilia*. Although asexphobia and asexphilia take different shapes in that the former is a repulsion to asexuality while the latter is a fascination with and desire for asexuality, both are forms of prejudice against asexuality and nonsexuality. Both asexphobia and asexphilia operate through essentialized assumptions about asexuality.

Some scholars claim that mediated depictions of East Asian men's sexual passivity and nonsexual masculinity may offer radical challenges to the hegemony of compulsory sexuality and heteropatriarchal masculinity. These scholars argue that we should embrace mediated images of desexualized East Asian men as a form of *ethical masculinity* that provides alternative visions of masculinity to those of hypersexual, heteronormative, and patriarchal masculinity (Shimizu 2012). Tan Hoang Nguyen (2014) claims that the popular depiction of East Asian men as sexually passive and desexualized *bottoms* in gay pornography, rather than being interpreted as merely racist, should be viewed as a form of empowerment that these men could derive through bottomhood. Nguyen and Celine Parreñas Shimizu claim that mediated images of sexual passivity and nonsexuality can be reinterpreted as forms of sexual agency (Shimizu 2012; Nguyen 2014). I agree with these scholars to the extent that I believe there can be sexual agency in passivity or nonsexuality.

However, acts of sexual passivity, bottomhood, and nonsexuality can be empowering only when individuals voluntarily engage with such feelings or acts. The discourses of nonsexual Korean men that some of my white Hallyu tourist informants generated imparted images of desexualized masculinity on Korean men without consideration for how they identified themselves. My informants' acts of desexualizing Korean men were similar to how *rice queens* (white gay men who claim to be exclusively attracted to Asian men) seek Asian men as sex partners because of the stereotype that they are sexually passive (Eguchi 2020). Regardless of how gay Asian men view their sexuality, they experience figurative castration by the rice queens, whose racialized erotic desires for Asian men are rooted in popular perceptions that render gay Asian men as sexually passive.

In such ways, race and ethnicity are central to the formation of erotic desires and fantasies. In particular, sex tourism is notable in that individuals specifically partake in it to seek sexual relationships with the racial and ethnic *other*. In the next section, I analyze my essay topic in relation to the existing literatures on sex tourism.

## Racialized Erotics and Transnational Travel

There is a long history of people traveling overseas to look for sexual partners. In particular, "there has been a historical, colonial, and imperial path for men whose western/US American citizenships reflect mobility, cultural capital, and economic privilege to fall in and out of love" with foreigners (Eguchi 2020, 74). Extensive feminist scholarship has examined the politics of western men's sex

tourism to the global South (Brennan 2004; Rivers-Moore 2016). Certainly, *western* does not indicate a monolithic group of individuals. However, in the context of sex tourism, the term *western* is useful in denoting the privileges that western male sex tourists experience based on the combination of their class, race, and nationality.

Sexual assumptions about the racialized *other* play crucial roles in facilitating transnational sex tourism. Male sex tourists appear to be motivated by essentialist and binary conceptions of women in their home countries versus the racial and national *other*. For instance, Julia Meszaros notes that western men who travel to Asian countries for sex claim to seek Asian women as intimate partners because they believe that they are more traditional and sexually submissive compared to western women (Meszaros 2018). These men operate based on stereotypes of Asian women and western women as opposed to the diverse ways that these women embody sexuality in their everyday lives.

Research on sex tourism to Korea has focused on similar politics of race and sex in the intimate encounters between the male sex tourists and Korean women. For example, there has been extensive research on the politics of interracial and interethnic intimacies between US soldiers and Korean women, as well as those between men who traveled to Korea on business who were *treated* to sex with Korean women by their Korean business partners (Norma 2014; Soh 2004). These men seemed to operate under certain sexualized stereotypes about Korean women.

Women also engage in sex tourism to form sexual relations with the racial and ethnic *other*. Existing research examines how women from North America and western Europe travel to places such as the Caribbean, Egypt, and Argentina to form intimate relations with men whom they view as more naturally sexual than men back home (Jacobs 2009; Pruitt and LaFont 1995; Törnqvist 2012). Similarly, some Japanese women travel to the United States to have sex with American men (white or Black men) whom they deem to be more sexual than Japanese men (Kelsky 1999). These female sex tourists' transnational sex tourism appears to be motivated by their racial stereotypes about men of other races and ethnicities: they traveled abroad to find men whom they conceived to be more naturally (hyper)sexual than men back in their home countries.

My white Hallyu tourist informants were engaging in sex tourism. However, my essay diverges from existing research on sex tourism in that sex and the sexual availability of local men were not central to my informants' travels to Korea. In other words, I examine a form of sex tourism in which sex was not at the heart of the tourists' desires. If my informants were not seeking sex, what were they seeking in their transnational travels to Korea? I address this question through analyses of a transnationally popular Korean television drama titled *Dokkaebi* (English title: *Guardian: The Lonely and Great God*) and data gathered through ethnographic fieldwork.

## Methods

I conducted thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Seoul during 2017–18. During this period, I stayed in hostels around Seoul so that I could approach the hostel guests. I asked them why they traveled to Korea. If they claimed that they came because of Korean popular culture, I recruited them as my research participants. I used a snowball method to recruit participants: my informants introduced me to other Hallyu tourists. In total, I recruited 123 informants. I also interviewed a number of Korean women in order to compare their views on Korean masculinity to that of the Hallyu tourists.

All of the Hallyu tourist informants were 19 years old or in their early to mid-20s. The majority of them claimed to be college students from the United States, Canada, Switzerland, Sweden, France, Germany, Netherland, and Denmark, and some of them were from Russia. Except for several African American women, most of my informants identified as white or passed as white in Korea. Although I did not inquire deeply into their financial situations, I inferred that most of my informants came from middle- to upper-middle-class backgrounds. Approximately half of my informants were repeat visitors to Korea. Their time in Korea lasted from a couple of weeks to three months. Many of my informants could comprehend Korean due to their consumption of Korean popular culture, and some could fluently communicate in Korean. All of my informants spoke English. I recruited participants who could communicate in either of those languages.

Most of the initial interviews were group interviews. During these, I asked my informants about the types of Korean television dramas they watched and what they thought about the dramas. After the group interviews, I conducted individual interviews and asked more personal questions regarding my informants' erotic perceptions of Korean men and their experiences with Korean men in real life. During and after the interviews, I conducted participant observations: I accompanied them to parties and clubs to observe how they interacted with Korean men. After several days, I conducted follow-up interviews with the tourists to inquire whether their thoughts about Korean men had changed based on their real-life encounters with Korean men.

Through the interviews and participant-observation, I observed that my informants were seeking intimate relations with Korean men that did not center around sex. Most of them did not explicitly use terms such as *nonsexual* or *asexual*. However, roughly half of my informants appraised Korean men for their sexual unassertiveness by describing them as gentlemen who were supposedly less sexual or nonsexual, and thereby more romantic and respectful toward women. Although nonsexuality, romantic attitude, and respect for women are not necessarily correlated, some of my informants claimed that these qualities were indistinguishable from one another. They referred to such characteristics interchangeably to describe the reasons that they were attracted to Korean men.

During the group interviews, I asked my informants to name some Korean television dramas that they found memorable: many of my informants listed *Dokkaebi*. In the next section, I examine the television drama *Dokkaebi* and how it portrays Korean men in the context of intimate relationships.

### **Korean Television Dramas: Nonsexual and Unconditional Intimacy**

*Dokkaebi* is a transnationally popular Korean television drama that aired from December 2, 2016, to January 21, 2017. The drama was exported to online streaming websites and broadcasting networks around the world (Yoon 2017). The show's title refers to a mythic creature with magical powers that appears in Korean folktales. It is a playful creature that likes to play pranks on humans. In the television drama, the male protagonist is a Dokkaebi. Although the television drama utilizes some of the folklore-based characteristics of Dokkaebi in depicting the male protagonist, the overall plot of the television drama is not based on Korean folktales or history.

The drama revolves around a love story between a 935-year-old Dokkaebi named Kim Shin and a high school student named Eun-Tak who was born with the destiny of becoming a Dokkaebi's bride. Kim Shin is destined to die at the hands of his bride, but neither Kim Shin nor Eun-Tak are aware of that fate. Unaware of their sad destinies, Kim Shin and Eun-Tak meet and fall in love. Kim Shin provides her with a haven in his home. As their love deepens, they find out that, by God's machinations, Eun-Tak has to kill Kim Shin or else die in his place. In other words, they cannot both be alive at the same time. The television drama focuses on how the two protagonists' relationship develops and the emotional turmoil that they go through because of their terrible fate.

The drama focuses on the characters' gazes to demonstrate their love for one another. More specifically, it uses shot/countershot with close-ups on the actors' faces to indicate that Kim Shin and Eun-Tak harbor erotic feelings for each other. For example, the show's emotional climax comes when Eun-Tak has to kill Kim Shin despite their love. Instead of waiting for Eun-Tak to kill him, Kim Shin commits suicide so that he can save her from the emotional agony of having to kill him. As he is dying, they intently stare into each other's eyes. The camera captures their intimate gaze through extreme close-ups of their faces, focusing on his face and his gaze toward her and then cutting to show her gazing at him. The close-ups fill the screen with the characters' faces and emphasize the intimacy, care, and sadness portrayed through their facial expressions and their gazes toward each other. The shot/countershot effectively establishes the characters' mutual affections.

Apart from focusing on the protagonists' mutual gaze, *Dokkaebi* also focuses on depicting Kim Shin's unrequited gaze toward Eun-Tak. There are very few scenes throughout the series that depict Eun-Tak staring at Kim Shin while he is looking away; the drama uses shot/countershot to depict her gazing at him so



that the viewers see that they are gazing at each other. On the other hand, he is depicted gazing at her often, even when she is not gazing at him. For instance, after they have a big fight, Eun-Tak refuses to look at Kim Shin. She will not acknowledge his presence; even when they meet on the street, she walks away from him. The wide-angle shot shows Eun-Tak walking along a snowy road toward the camera. It appears as if the road is empty and she is walking by herself, but the camera angle shifts sideways, and the viewers see Kim Shin walking behind her, gazing at her back. He is following her and watching over her in case she encounters danger in the empty streets. The scene reverts between wide-angle shots that show both of them walking one after the other and the close-ups of Kim Shin's face to show him softly gazing at Eun-Tak, waiting for her anger to subside. In this way, the television drama shows that even though his gaze and acts of care are unrequited, he continues to show his affection for her.

It is noteworthy that strict censorship regulations are part of the reason for the nonsexual depictions of Korean men in the television dramas. Government censorship and broadcasting regulations limit explicit depictions of sexuality in Korean media. The Korea Communication Standards Commission (KCSC) dedicates a significant portion of its rulebook to regulating portrayals of sexuality in media. According to the KCSC rulebook, television programs are banned from depicting sex as a marketable commodity or sensationalizing sexual intercourse. They are also banned from depicting motions and sounds associated with sex acts (KCSC 2017).<sup>2</sup>

Due to such conservative regulations against mediated sexuality, in colloquial discourses in Korea, viewers refer to the television dramas' would-be sex scenes as *bed scenes*, which denotes how the characters do not engage in sex acts. In *Dokkaebi*, the characters lie in bed, fully clothed, staring at each other. For instance, on their wedding night, Kim Shin pats Eun-Tak to sleep and endearingly stares into her face. The camera films them from a high angle, and the viewers see the characters' fully clothed bodies lying next to each other on the bed. Eun-Tak tells Kim Shin that she is sleepy and closes her eyes; he pats her to sleep while tenderly gazing into her sleeping face. In this scene, Kim Shin and Eun-Tak's physical intimacy consists of nonsexual yet intimate and caring demonstrations of gazing into each other's eyes and patting each other to sleep; there are no innuendos regarding sex acts. The KCSC claims that it enforces strict regulations on depictions of sexuality because such scenes would "destroy Korean moral sensibility and ethics" (KCSC 2017). If television programs do not abide by the KCSC's rules, they are severely penalized; producers of an offending television program are forced to apologize to viewers for their show's vulgarity.

As I analyze in detail later in this essay, some of my informants claimed that one of the main reasons they came to erotically desire Korean men was the (sexually) unconditional love that male characters show toward female characters in Korean television dramas. Such is the case in *Dokkaebi*, which portrays the protagonists' affection for each other as being sexually unconditional. In other

words, their acts of care for each other are not portrayed as being premised on sexual compensation. In particular, Kim Shin demands nothing—and especially nothing sexual—from Eun-Tak, in spite of saving her life at the cost of his own. Several years after his suicide, Kim Shin returns from the dead. (He was able to reincarnate because of his magical powers as a *Dokkaebi*.) Instead of inserting himself back into Eun-Tak's life, he maintains his distance while trying to figure out whether she has moved on from him and leads a new and happy life. He longingly stares at her from afar and silently helps her if she encounters any troubles. Again, the show emphasizes Kim Shin's one-sided gazes toward Eun-Tak through multiple camera angles. He only reinserts himself back into her life when he realizes that she is living an unhappy life because she still loves him and misses him.

In such ways, the television drama portrays Korean men as neither sexually assertive nor demanding. They are depicted as sexually restrained or even nonsexual individuals who provide for women and prioritize emotionally intimate relationships with them over sexual relationships. In the next section, I analyze my informants' interpretations of *Dokkaebi* and the men depicted in the Korean television dramas.

### **Hallyu Tourists' Interpretations of Korean Television Dramas**

My Hallyu tourist informants appeared to conflate mediated depictions of nonsexual Korean men in television dramas with Korean men in real life. On one occasion, my informants were watching clips of *Dokkaebi* in the living room of a hostel. They were riveted by the scene of Kim Shin committing suicide and exchanging loving gazes with Eun-Tak. Some of them moaned and grabbed each other's hands, saying, in both Korean and English, "Oh my god! That is so romantic!" There were also some male backpackers from Australia and the United States in the room, alongside my Hallyu tourist informants. In contrast to my informants, who were joyfully immersed in the television drama, these male backpackers' faces were scrunched in disbelief. A male tourist from Australia remarked, "How is that romantic? That is stupid. Instead of eye-fucking each other, they should call an ambulance to get him help. No one seems to have common sense in these dramas." As he said this, some of my informants glared at him. Cathy, a Hallyu tourist from the United States, said, "What do you mean eye-fucking? That is so gross. You men can only think of sex even when looking at something so romantic and heartbreaking." Other Hallyu tourists nodded their heads in agreement. A white male backpacker from the United States said, "What do you like about Korean men anyways? All these Korean men are so feminine and wear makeup all the time. They are so gay. You should be attracted to strong and tough men, not those girly boys." Cathy rolled her eyes and retorted, "Eye-fucking, muscles, strong, tough. . . . That's all you think about, and you wonder why we love Korean men. What is wrong with them

wearing makeup? What if they are feminine? That doesn't mean that they are not attractive." Another Hallyu tourist from Germany chimed in, "Look at him [Kim Shin] in the drama. He loves her so much. He gives up his life for her. Korean men are like that. You should learn [from them]."

I observed such arguments between Hallyu tourists and other male tourists quite frequently throughout my field research. In the case described above, both the male backpackers and my informants were operating under the assumption that the men depicted in the television dramas reflect how Korean men perform their gender and sexual identities in real life. On the one hand, the male backpackers expressed incredulity at the idea that *effeminate* Korean men could be erotically appealing to heterosexual women. The backpackers equated effeminate men with being homosexual, and thought that it was irrational for heterosexual women to adore these *gay* Korean men who were presumably sexually unavailable for them. Although these men did not define Korean men as asexual per se, they were suggesting that Korean men's *gayness* made them as sexually unavailable to my informants as if they were asexual individuals, and they could not understand why or how my informants could find these Korean men attractive. The male tourists were operating on the notion of compulsory sexuality, whereby everyone desires sex in intimate relationships.

On the other hand, my informants mocked the male tourists' obsessions with sex and hypersexual masculinity. They argued that just because Korean men appeared *gay* and sexually unavailable to women did not mean that they did not have an erotic appeal for heterosexual women. The backpackers were rejecting mediated Korean masculinity, whereas my informants were embracing it. However, both the male backpackers and my Hallyu tourist informants were essentializing the notion of Korean masculinity by assuming that the type of masculinity depicted in the television dramas was the only form of masculinity that Korean men embody. They were both assuming, based on their interpretations of the mediated images, that Korean men are universally effeminate and thereby potentially nonsexual or sexually unavailable to heterosexual women.

The type of *effeminate* masculinity that they were referring to, and that is often featured in Korean television dramas, is what is known in Korea as *kkonminam* masculinity. Kkonminam typically refers to young men in their late teens and twenties who are androgynously beautiful, with smooth skin, silky hair, and *feminine* mannerisms (Jung 2006). Kkonminam masculinity is a form of carefully constructed masculinity that derives from the Korean popular culture industry. Celebrities who are marketed as kkonminam, regardless of whether they are sexual in their private lives, are publicly portrayed as nonsexual and sexually innocent. According to some male K-pop idols, it is common practice for Korean talent management agencies to make their young male talents sign contracts that ban them from dating and having sex. These types of contracts are in place to prevent these male celebrities from ruining their nonsexual images by having their sex lives revealed to the public.

Literally translated, *kkonminam* means *flower boys*. Sun Jung (2010) claims that these men embody *soft* masculinity that is antithetical to *hard*, physical, and hypersexual masculinity. By being likened to flowers, these men are detached from the image of the penis and sex acts. Furthermore, the adjective *soft* that is used to describe them dissociates them from the sexual image of an erect (*hard*) penis. Men who are *kkonminam* may act in ways that appear effeminate and nonsexual from the lens of compulsory sexuality and masculine hypersexuality. Some fans of Korean television dramas interpret *kkonminam* as *safe* men who will not make inappropriate and unwanted sexual advances toward women (Elfvig-Hwang 2011).

The male backpackers and my informants conflated *kkonminam* masculinity with Orientalist stereotypes of East Asian masculinity. These stereotypes of East Asian men's sexuality have been replete with irony. On the one hand, they have been labeled as "yellow perils"—sexually deviant men who will sexually taint white women's purity (Marchetti 1994). On the other hand, they have been seen as emasculated men who were *safe* because they were supposedly weaker than men of other races. Mari Yoshihara (2002) critically analyzes how, throughout US history, many white women who traveled to East Asian countries claimed that they felt freer and safer there than they did back home. These women claimed that they felt threatened and suffocated by heteropatriarchal masculinity in the United States, but that they did not experience such feelings in the East Asian countries because the local men were supposedly not as domineering as the men back home. Presumably, these women's sense of freedom derived from the privileges that they experienced because of their whiteness and US citizenship. Instead of taking account of their privileged status in these countries, they assumed that the local men were naturally *weaker* and *safer* than men back home, based on the aforementioned Orientalist stereotypes. The male backpackers and my informants echoed these sentiments in their arguments regarding *effeminate* Korean masculinity.

Simply put, my Hallyu tourist informants' erotic desires for nonsexual Korean men were racially charged. Their erotic desires diverged from those held by Korean women and other Asian female fans of Korean television dramas. Research on Asian female fans suggests that Korean television dramas have played significant roles in shaping these women's views on Korean men (Chan and Xueli 2011; Lee 2008). However, their desires for Korean men did not revolve around assumptions of nonsexuality. For example, some Japanese fans claimed that, before watching Korean television dramas, they considered Korean men to be patriarchal; after watching the television dramas, they claimed that they viewed Korean men as ideal husbands who were far from patriarchal (Takeda 2014). Women from other Asian countries similarly claimed that Korean television dramas were responsible for their dramatically changed views about Korean men (Shim 2007). These women's desires for Korean men were based on the notion that Korean men appeared to be less patriarchal and traditional

than they had assumed prior to watching the television dramas. Their erotic fantasies about Korean men did not derive from stereotyped assumptions about Korean men's nonsexuality.

Korean women I interviewed claimed that they were too proximate to Korean men in real life to fantasize about them as nonsexual beings. As one Korean woman claimed:

I enjoyed *Dokkaebi*. Who would not? Gong-Yu [the actor who played the male lead] is so hot! But I know that the men in the dramas are different from Korean men in real life. We are surrounded by Korean men in our everyday lives. We see that our dads, brothers, and coworkers are unlike the drama characters. How could we think that Korean men are nonsexual? The Hallyu tourists who travel to Korea with such assumptions are in for a rude awakening.

The Korean women I worked with argued that although they enjoyed Korean television dramas, they could not fantasize about Korean men based on these dramas. They clearly demarcated the boundaries between fantasy and reality with regard to Korean men. Neither they nor the Asian women who were interviewed in other research equated romantic images of Korean men with nonsexuality. In comparison, some of my white informants desired Korean men because they deemed these men to be nonsexual. Race appeared to play a significant role in why the white Hallyu tourists desired Korean men as nonsexual beings. In the following sections, I analyze my informants' desires and their real-life encounters with Korean men.

### Redefining Intimacy: Korean Men and Romantic Asexuality

As anticipated by some Korean women with whom I worked, some of the Hallyu tourists were disappointed that the Korean men they met in real life were dissimilar to the *flower boys* in the television dramas. As one of my informants from Denmark claimed, "some Korean men are just fuck-boys. They are not like the romantic men in Korean television dramas who do not care about sex. All they want is sex." She was disappointed that many Korean men had approached her for sex at the club the night before. She felt a sense of dissonance between her fantasy and her actual experiences with Korean men. Nonetheless, when I asked her whether she would stop fantasizing about Korean men altogether, she said that she still desired Korean men and that she wanted to find a Korean boyfriend before returning to Denmark. "Those fuck-boys are probably exceptions," she told me. Even though she experienced Korean men who did not conform to *kkonminam* masculinity, she firmly held onto her belief that Korean men were nonsexual. Her perception of Korean men as nonsexual was so strong that she held onto her belief—in spite of her experience to the contrary—and her desire to find and date a nonsexual Korean man.

I observed my informants reinterpreting real-world Korean men's physical advances in ways that did not disrupt their belief in Korean men's nonsexuality. For instance, Lucy, one of my informants from Sweden, claimed that she finally kissed a Korean man she had been dating since she first arrived in Korea a few weeks ago. "It took him weeks to finally kiss me," she reported. "I find it romantic that it took such a long time for us to do that. That is why I feel so safe around Korean men. Men back home are so [sexually] aggressive. They grope me and try to have sex all the time. I do not like that." Lucy, as well as my other informants, described Korean men's physical advances as signs of their *romantic asexuality*. According to Ela Przybylo, "romantic asexuality includes an interest in building romantic, if not sex-based, relationships with others, which may include kissing, touching, and cuddling" (2019, 5). Romantic asexuality is a form of intimacy that is not based on sexual intercourse. Kissing, touching, and cuddling are not seen as extensions of sex acts; instead, they are reinterpreted as methods of building emotion-based romantic relationships that do not come with the pressure to engage in sexual intercourse.

Research indicates that many heterosexual women, at some point in their lives, have felt pressured to have sexual intercourse (Powell 2007; Ramsey and Hoyt 2015). In particular, asexual women claimed that they constantly felt pressured to have sex with their male partners; if they did not provide sex, they were made to feel guilty about stringing men along (Vares 2018, 529). These asexual women claimed that this feeling of guilt was one of the main reasons that they refrained from going on dates. Although my informants did not identify as asexual, they appeared to have felt similar senses of guilt and pressure related to sexual intercourse. Instead of being able to engage in sexual intercourse only when they wanted, they claimed that, when they were dating back in their home countries, they felt pressured to have sex even when they did not want to.

Some of my informants seemed to characterize Korean men as nonsexual romantics because that allowed them to engage in physical acts such as hugging, kissing, and cuddling at their own pace, based on their own desires, without feeling pressured by the male partners. They did not have to feel guilty about those acts potentially not leading to sexual intercourse because, in their view, Korean men were nonsexual and did not care about sex. They could reinterpret their Korean male partners' hugs and kisses as romantic gestures devoid of sexual innuendos. Some of my informants were designating Korean men as nonsexual and racial *others* who could provide alternatives to sex-based intimacies that made them feel pressured into sex.

Nonsexual intimacies are often marginalized in scholarly theories on intimacy and eroticism. Intimacy is often associated with sexual or physical intimacy. For instance, some scholars state that sexual drives are universal desires (Giddens 1992; Lindholm 2006). Such an argument excludes the possibility of asexuality and nonsexuality. Furthermore, colloquially, as well as in academia, the term *intimacy* is used interchangeably with *sex*: many scholars use *intimacy*

to refer to sexual relationships (Berlant 2000; Lin 2008; Moran 2003). However, I argue that intimacy is not just about sex. According to Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, “our intimate needs would include not just sexual gratification but also our bodily upkeep, care for loved ones, creating and sustaining social and emotional ties, and health and hygiene maintenance” (2010, 5). Social and emotional ties—that are not based on sexual desires—can also be intimate. In other words, intimacy is predicated neither on physicality nor on sexual relations. My Hallyu tourist informants appeared to be seeking intimacies that were not based on sex acts and sexual connections.

The Hallyu tourists with whom I interviewed distinguished between romance, sex, and intimacy. They made it very clear to me that they were mainly seeking romance, not sex, from Korean men. They equated romantic relationships with emotional intimacy and differentiated those from sex-based relationships. Jessica was a Danish tourist who was a repeat visitor to Korea and was semifluent in Korean. She claimed:

It is fun to have sex and stuff, but that is kind of like we are using each other, you know? It is not anything emotional or stuff like that. We just use each other, and that is the end. Those things [romance and sex] are totally different. If I have someone I really like, sex and all that stuff are not that important. We will be doing a long-distance relationship anyway so we will not be having that much sex. What matters is the heart and feelings and caring about each other enough to keep in contact through long-distance.

Jessica not only distinguished sex from romance but also differentiated sex from intimacy. For her, sex was not an act of intimacy per se; she reserved the concept of intimacy for *emotional* intimacy. Sex was just a physical exchange that she claimed to engage in lightheartedly, and it was something she said she could do without if she found the right man. If my Hallyu tourist informants were simply attracted to the idea of nonsexual relationships and men who could provide such relationships, why did they feel the need to travel all the way to Korea? Why did they feel they had to travel across the globe to find nonsexual men?

### **Racialized Erotic Desires for the Nonsexual Other**

Erotics is entwined with the politics of difference (Mankekar and Schein 2013). Erotic desires are one's feelings for the metaphysical *other* that can facilitate friendly encounters, but they can also cause social tensions. According to Sharon Patricia Holland (2012), sometimes racism is confluent with erotics. Holland claims that erotics has the power to facilitate the entrenchment of differences. For instance, racial fetishes, on cursory inspection, seem to bond different races of people intimately. However, more in-depth analyses of racial fetishes indicate that some of these xenophilic eroticisms may be rooted in—and

perpetuate—racist notions of racial differences. In that regard, racial fetishes and racialized eroticisms on some levels reinforce racial stereotypes (Zheng 2016).

My Hallyu tourist informants' erotic desires were not only sexuality-based desires for the nonsexual *other*. Their erotic desires comprised of a multitude of desires for the racial and sexual *other*. They desired Korean men because they assumed that Korean men were different from men back in their home countries. These tourists' desires for nonsexual Korean masculinity were interwoven with the politics of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality. Korean men were the racialized, sexual, and national *other* whom my informants fantasized as antithetical to the men back home. The mediatized images of Korean kkonminam happened to fit the type of *otherness* that my informants were seeking.

My informants contrasted their dating experiences back home with their expectations and experiences of dating nonsexual Korean men. In particular, they expressed wariness regarding romantic gestures from men whom they dated back home because they believed such gestures came from these men's ulterior motives for sex. One informant claimed that "whenever a guy pays for my meal, I feel like he has the right to demand something from me in return. It is like he owns me now and can demand sex [from me] even if I do not want to. That just makes me uncomfortable." Many of my informants echoed such sentiments: they claimed that when men back home provided for them by paying for dates, they felt that they were sexually indebted to these men.

In contrast, the fantasies inspired by romantic television dramas motivated my informants to act differently on dates with Korean men compared to the guarded ways they claimed to have acted back home. I observed my informants drinking alcohol and eating the food that Korean men bought them. My informants, who regularly went on dates with Korean men, claimed that Korean men paid for all of the expenses of the dinners and drinks. When I asked these tourists whether they felt pressured to reciprocate with sex, they claimed that Korean men were unlike the hypersexual men back home. They claimed that they traveled to Korea to seek intimate relations with nonsexual Korean men in order to *escape* from the pressures to *compensate* men through sex. By fantasizing about nonsexual Korean men, they sought to escape from the sexsociety, where they claimed that sex felt like a form of compensation that they gave to their male partners rather than an intimate act that they mutually enjoyed.

At the same time, while explaining their attraction to nonsexual Korean men, some of them reinforced racist assumptions about East Asian men by claiming that it was in these men's nature to be nonsexual and weak. For instance, one of my informants claimed, "Well, for example, look at Korean television dramas. I do not see Korean men in television dramas doing it [demanding sex]. I think it is just in their nature not to be that way. Based on my dates with Korean men, they are weaker than men back home." Her *asexphilic* desires perpetuated racial and sexual prejudices, perhaps without her realization or intent. To her,



the purported nonsexuality of Korean men was confluent with stereotypes of them as weak and effeminate.

At first glance, my informants may appear irrational or immature because they formed their erotic fantasies based on fictional romance stories and traveled to Korea to make their fantasies come true. Fantasies are often stigmatized as “wild, undisciplined imaginings; these imaginings are by nature childish or immature,” and people, especially women, who fantasize are stereotyped as those who are too disconnected from reality to function “normally” (Barker 2014, 155). However, such negative attitudes toward fantasies disregard the significance of fantasies in shaping people’s identities as well as their views on sexuality and gender. Erotic desires are tightly interlaced with imaginations and fantasies (Mankekar and Schein 2013). As Judith Butler (2000) argues, fantasies and reality are always already tightly intertwined. In other words, what we categorize as fantasies mark the boundaries for what we categorize as realities. Fantasies and realities share boundaries, and in that regard, they coexist and influence one another.

My informants who traveled to Korea to form intimate relations with Korean men were neither disconnected from reality nor irrational. Rather, their erotic desires for nonsexual Korean men were deeply rooted in their dissatisfaction with their reality, especially as it pertained to hypersexual masculinity and the compulsory and transactional sexuality that they claimed to have experienced while dating back home. The Korean television dramas offered these viewers enticing visions of alternative masculinity and nonsexual intimacy that helped them escape from the sexsociety. Through their transnational sex tourism, they were asserting their sexual agency that problematized the dating cultures where compulsory sexuality was perceived as the norm.

At the same time, some of my informants’ sexual agency derived from racially and sexually *othering* Korean men and essentializing Korean masculinity. Their desires perpetuated racial prejudices against East Asian men’s sexuality. They conflated their desires for nonsexual men with stereotypes of East Asian men. My informants were not asexphobic; rather, some of them claimed to be attracted to nonsexual men. However, their asexphilic desires cast Korean men as the nonsexual and racial *other*. In that regard, they were marginalizing nonsexuality by defining it as an exotic trait of the racial *other*.

## Conclusion

The relationship between my Hallyu tourist informants and their Korean male partners revolved around complex racialized and gendered assumptions about the *other*. In this article, I focused on one aspect of their racialized erotic relationships by analyzing the politics of the Hallyu tourists’ racialized erotic desires for nonsexual Korean men, which conflated Korean television dramas’ depictions

of Korean men with existing racist stereotypes about East Asian men's sexuality. Some of my Hallyu tourist informants established an *other* in nonsexual Korean men whom they could seek in order to escape from the sexsociety. They characterized Korean men as the racial and sexual *other* who served as the antitheses of the purportedly hypersexual men and sexually oriented cultures from which they came. Their erotic desires provide us with points of departure to examine asexuality and nonsexuality beyond the framework of individual identities. My informants mobilized discourses of nonsexuality in spite of not identifying as asexual or nonsexual. At the same time, their racialized erotic desires provide insight into how discourses of nonsexuality can be co-opted to affirm racialized assumptions about ethnic and racial *others*.

It was not within the scope of this essay to examine how Korean men reacted to their desexualization by the Hallyu tourists. However, I find it imperative to conclude by noting that the Korean men were not always the helpless victims of the white tourists' racialized desires. During my field research, I observed some Korean men purposely perform nonsexuality because they were motivated by their own desires to be intimate with white women. Dating white women gave them social status and bragging rights among their Korean male peers. Hence, some of them appeared to purposefully perform nonsexuality in order to satisfy the white female tourists' erotic desires.

Future research on people of color's relationships to nonsexuality would contribute to scholarly debates on nonsexuality by demonstrating the entwinement of nonsexuality, race, and gender. I suggest that future research on topics such as how Asian and Asian American men react to stereotypes that desexualize them, or how some people of color purposefully perform nonsexuality to defy the racist stigma that characterizes Black and brown people as hypersexual, would offer us ways to expand our understanding of nonsexuality through the intersectional politics of race, sex, gender, and nationality.

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## Notes

1. All of the interviews and participant-observation data that I use in this essay are from the ethnographic field research I conducted in Korea during 2017–18.
2. I am responsible for the translation of the KCSC rules from Korean to English.

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